



Pick Your Path to Health

Shots Save Lives: Know Your Immunization History

"Vaccination is one of the greatest public health achievements in the United States in the 20th century. Immunizations have eradicated smallpox; eliminated poliomyelitis in the Americas; and controlled measles, rubella, tetanus, diphtheria, Haemophilus influenzae type b, and other infectious diseases. Today, the greatest vaccine-preventable disease burden for the U.S. population is among adults." Taken from remarks delivered by David Satcher, M.D., Ph.D., Assistant Secretary for Health and Surgeon General, delivered to the U.S. House of Representatives Committee on Government Reform on August 3, 1999.

As infectious diseases continue to decline, some people have become less interested in the consequences of vaccine-preventable illnesses, like diphtheria and tetanus, and increasingly concerned about the risks associated with vaccines. But the benefits of getting vaccinated-to you and your community-far outweigh the risks. We generally make sure that our children receive their vaccinations, but vaccinations continue to be essential for adults as well.

How do vaccines work?

After you receive a vaccination, your body makes antibodies to fight the weak or dead germs in the vaccine. These antibodies "practice" on the weak germs so that when the real disease germs (which can be anywhere) invade, the antibodies will know how to destroy them. The result: you will not become ill from a potentially deadly disease. This protection against future disease is called immunity.

Vaccines are extensively tested in the laboratory and in human beings to ensure their safety before they are licensed by the U.S. Food and Drug Administration. Once licensed for public use, vaccines are continually monitored for safety.

Many of us had a full range of vaccines during childhood; however, not all vaccines last a lifetime. Immunization rates are lower in African Americans due to a combination of factors, which include both less likelihood of being

offered immunizations and less likelihood of accepting an offer to be immunized.

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), about 45,000 adults die each year due to complications from influenza, pneumococcal infections, or hepatitis B—all vaccine-preventable illnesses. You should discuss the following vaccines when reviewing your immunization history with your doctor.

- ***Influenza***. All people aged 65 or older should get this vaccine each year in the fall. In addition, people who have chronic heart, vascular, or lung disorders, including asthma; immunodeficiency disorders (such as AIDS); women in their second or third trimester of pregnancy; and anyone who could transmit the flu to people at high risk should also receive this vaccination.
- ***Tetanus and diphtheria toxoids (Td)***. Tetanus (lockjaw) can cause lasting damage to speech, memory, and mental function. All adults should receive this vaccine every 10 years.
- ***Pneumococcal (PPV; pneumonia)***. This disease accounts for 500,000 cases of pneumonia, 50,000 cases of bacteremia (blood infection), and claims 25,000 lives each year. Everyone 65 or older should receive this vaccine, as well as people who have had diabetes, chronic heart disease, vascular disease, or lung disorder for two or more years.
- ***Hepatitis A***. Hepatitis A is the most common vaccine preventable disease in travelers. Before travelling abroad, ask your doctor about this vaccine.
- ***Hepatitis B***. The hepatitis B virus is 100 times more infectious than the virus that causes AIDS. It infects between 100,000 to 140,000 Americans annually. People who have multiple sex partners or a recent episode of a sexually transmitted disease should get this vaccine.
- ***Measles and mumps***. Anyone can get measles, but those born after 1956 who have no proof of immunity are particularly at risk.
- ***Rubella (German measles)***. As many as 12 million women of childbearing age are susceptible to this disease. If rubella occurs during pregnancy, it can result in severe birth defects, miscarriage, and stillbirths.

- **Varicella (chicken pox).** Approximately 5-10 percent of adults are susceptible to chicken pox, and adults are 25 times more likely than children to die of this disease. If you have not had chicken pox, you should consider getting this vaccine.

Pick Your Path to Health is a national public health campaign sponsored by the Office on Women's Health within the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. For other tips on improving your health, or for more information on the Pick Your Path to Health campaign, call 1-800-994-WOMAN or visit the Web site at <http://www.4woman.gov>.